



## Witnessing to Style over Substance

*Evangelical liberation from captivity to the invisible religion of corporate power involves, first, the clearest recognition of how such captivity has falsified the gospel under the cover of what seems to be positive religious devotion.*

J. Stanley Glen,  
*Justification by Success*, 1979

*We assemble a legendary line-up of world-class leaders, best-selling authors, professional athletes, and renowned coaches... Host our Maximum Impact Simulcast and be the church known for "taking care of business" in your community!*

Promotional for a seminar pitched to draw business professionals to Christ, 2007

How can we be "salt and light" in the world? A national convention I recently attended purported to address this question. What I encountered was a glitzy showroom filled with religious-product vendors, outreach toolkits, and Scripture-printed freebies in what amounted to a church-marketing emporium. On display were goods and services from the high-tech to the outlandish: for example, cross-shaped cellular transmission towers, revenue-raising Internet dating services, evangelistic golfing, gospel puzzle-cubes, Christian stand-up gigs, and ministry clown apparel. One could also peruse a host of customizable programs to help congregations care for poor people in accessible and manageable ways. And at the drop of a business card, this iPod could be yours!

Having never been to one of these before, I was rather impressed by how indistinguishable the convention was

from any secular, corporate trade show in America. It seemed the only thing Christian about the interactive kiosks, flashy banners, and 42" plasma screens was their liberal use of Bible verses or clichés ("...maximize your influence for the glory of God"). In what struck me as a remarkably blatant manifestation of style over substance, the convention pondered not the message of the gospel but, rather, the latest systems to deliver it. As one product rep insisted, "If you don't catch their attention within the first eight seconds, you've already lost 'em."

Critique of evangelical shtick is, of course, not new. Some thoughtful Christians, like Presbyterian minister Glen quoted above, have long exposed the evangelical church's accommodation



of worldly strategies (corporate, political, or otherwise) to "spread the good news." Moreover, even the secular movie industry has insightfully lampooned the phenomena. Movies like *Saved*, *The Big Kahuna*, *The Jesus Factor*, *Jesus Camp*, and, most recently, *Friends of God* come to mind. The world, we must acknowledge, is fully capable of seeing through our pious exterior. Too often, when the world peers into the church, it merely sees itself. The only difference is that, unlike us, the world doesn't pretend to be holy.

While it is unfair to generalize evangelicals as sold out on formulaic gimmickry or high-tech salesmanship, we would do well to assume that most of us approach the "salt and light" enterprise on our terms rather than God's. As a congregation we have been reflecting on

the Beatitudes, which, Jesus seems to say, form the substance of our witness. Poverty of spirit. Meekness. Mercy. Peacemaking. Persecution. Suffering. Unattainable through CD-ROM and web-based tools, being a light in the world appears to have much more to do with presence than productivity, character than impact. In other words, we bear witness not by what we get done, but rather, by Whom we reflect.

As one in the business of neighborhood outreach, I find in the Sermon on the Mount a humbling corrective to my proclivity for accomplishments that have little to do with the gospel. How many neighbors are taking notice of what we're doing? How many volunteers did I manage to mobilize at our health fair? Are student's grades rising substantially through our after-school tutoring program? What problems have we solved? How many people did we serve? When will we get recognized again for our work in the community? How many readers will respond to this article?

When absorbed by questions such as these, techniques and formulas suddenly become very alluring. The notion that Christ is glorified in weakness holds little interest. We want results and we want them now. We have a world to impress; we want to showcase our outcomes. But while we may publicly credit God for a particular outcome, secular society knows when we've simply appropriated its strategies. When this happens, we demonstrate a faith that is far less substantive or compelling than that of the average pagan. ■

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